

1-13-2011

The Philosopher's Stone

Philosophical Discussion Group, Armstrong State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/armstrong-philosopher-stone>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Philosophical Discussion Group, Armstrong State University, "The Philosopher's Stone" (2011). *The Philosopher's Stone*. 96.
<https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/armstrong-philosopher-stone/96>

This newsletter is brought to you for free and open access by the Armstrong College of Liberal Arts at Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Philosopher's Stone by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.

THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE

The Newsletter of the Philosophical Discussion Group

*Please join us for a discussion of technology, human values, and other thoughts.
We will meet in Gamble Hall 205 on Friday, January 21 at 3:00 pm.*

The New Leviathan

Part 2: Theological and Secular Responses

By B.J. Edenfield

In our last meeting we discussed the offspring of the New Leviathan, the cog. I promised a possible route out of the New Leviathan's cog mold which has forged us all. My fear, however, is that this task is beyond my abilities. We can begin to see what created the cog, the New Leviathan or technological society, but what set the New Leviathan in motion?

Two predominant routes (the only ones I can see), given our westernized minds, are the religious and the secular. One view is threatened by the New Leviathan and its offspring (the cog), while the other is left resolute and hopeless.

When Jacques Ellul wrote his *magnum opus*, *The Technological Society*, he hinted elsewhere that he expected more from a Christian reader than from a secular non-Christian reader. Such a religious reader, it appears, should notice that the totality of the technological system (not any of the individual parts or technologies) has become humanity's way of hiding from God. The New Leviathan is thus one more manifestation of sin. This approach is problematic at the outset for the secular mind, given its lack of relationship with a divine or anything else that might provide a context in which the totality of the technological system might be evaluated in non-technological terms.

On the secular approach, it might be helpful to think in terms of Darwinian evolution and mankind's struggle for

survival over our old foe, nature. In both routes, the rise of *techne* (the etymological forerunner of the word "technology") is connected to the struggle with nature. But what is *techne* and what does it have to do with nature?

In ancient Greece, Plato spent a great deal of time teaching his followers the concept of *techne* (sometimes translated as "craft" or "art"). This concept which appears repeatedly throughout Plato's writings is best described as "a body of knowledge that enables its possessor to do something or to produce a product in a rational, orderly, and unerring manner. People who possess a craft can teach what they know to others and, thus, can give an account of how it is that they do or produce what they do" (Brickhouse & Smith, 141). In isolation from any other concept, this definition seems harmless enough. In fact, it is quite useful for everyday survival. For example, the *techne* of farming is most helpful because eating is a necessity for human survival. So how can this seemingly helpful concept be responsible for the advent of the New Leviathan? This suggests that the seeds of the New Leviathan were planted long before Hobbes.

Across the Mediterranean Sea in another ancient culture (while I imagine Plato was finishing up *The Republic*), the Hebrew authors of Genesis suggest technology is not simply an innocently helpful body of knowledge. In Genesis 1:28 we read, "And God blessed them, and God said unto them, be fruitful, and multiple and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the

earth." The Hebrew word for the English translation of dominion is *Radah* (hdr) and will serve as the overarching theme for a theological investigation of New Leviathan.

The word "*Radah*" is used some twenty times in the Old Testament and always implies "to rule over", or "to reign". This concept has much stronger implications, both politically, philosophically, and historically than its Greek counterpart, "*techne*", when interpreted this way. When Socrates used the word "*techne*", it was simply a description, or mark, of something that mankind had already been using for thousands of years. Socrates only refined its meaning. *Techne* is important even though in my best estimation it is an inferior concept to *Radah* solely because *Radah* appears to be the motive for *techne* in a city. In the city, mankind practices dominion (*Radah*) over nature which requires the individual to use his/her craft (*techne*), whatever that might be, to rise above nature and subdue it. As a group, in this case the Hebrews and Greeks, hone their craft to conquer nature, first by rising out of hunter gatherer societies with the advent of agriculture and second by establishing civilizations, the New Leviathan was given life after a long incubation period.

Radah is, unlike the ideal of *techne* in the Greek tradition, unavoidably connected to sin and power. This pursuit of dominion is a ceaseless pursuit that once started cannot be stopped. The Tower of Babel story is a beautiful narrative of the technological society in which we now live. In the story, mankind has united, presumably under the interpretation of *Radah* and *techne* that I have stressed thus far. As

the Lord considers the implications, presumably of His command or at the very least a distortion of His command to take dominion (*Radah*) over the earth, He realizes that humanity's power is an unstoppable force by any power under heaven. As a result, only God can stop it. The technological society as a manifestation of dominion, then, is the void between God and man.

From a secular paradigm, Hobbes may have more relevance with regards to the city, or mankind's escape from nature. If we can slice away all the "pie-in-the-sky" jargon associated with the theological position, we find in Hobbes' view, Ellul's affirmation that, "Life in such an environment has no meaning" (Ellul, 6). For thinkers like Ellul, the technological system, society, and city in which we live is only worth railing against if the disputant has a theological basis. It would not make sense to engage a natural phenomena such as the rise of technology and its dehumanizing characteristics from a philosophical perspective if one were devoted to, say, materialism -- or any other non-theologically grounded position. Moreover, a discussion about technique and its control of our lives, from a materialist perspective, would be similar to a discussion of the evolution of the eyeball and the problems we face from the natural development of said eyeball (if there were any). This would amount to a discussion of facts without reference to values or any means of evaluating said facts.

Hobbes sought to mechanize the human being which is a hallmark of Ellul's description of *technique*. If humans are the product of random mutations, which in some way benefit our survival, then what flows from humanity is also a natural process, namely, the technological society. But how can this be problematic from a secular worldview? Perhaps the only interesting way to take up this discussion from the secular routed mindset is to talk about it as the *only world possible*. Unlike a Leibnizian *best possible worlds* model, wherein

God has chosen among all possible scenarios, the *only world possible* model dichotomizes between the technological society(=the only possible world), or extinction(=no world) as the only viable options. Since extinction is not a human option (at least for Leibniz) due to human *conatus*, the technological society is the *only world possible* since it exists and extinction does not. At least not yet. What this means, simply, is that mankind lives and breathes in the technological society as a result of evolution. How we evolved is simply a series of random mutations, so we are told, that are without *telos*. What survives over time is what can rise above its competition for food and mating. In our case, we rose out of nature through simple applications of *techne*, with *Radah* as our impetus, while kicking the ladder out from under us as we ascended. In my mind, these two concepts of *Radah* and *techne* are what separate us from animals. We systematically "rule over", channel, predict, and recreate nature to our increasing secular and theological satisfaction and comfort. A question rarely asked: Ought we to be comfortable? Secularly? Theologically?

In conclusion, and as promised, I will attempt to point the reader to what cannot be seen with the eyes - freedom. Dr. Nordenhaug has in class compared his students (and humans in general) to pears in bottles. He refers to a bottle of pear wine in which a fully grown pear is inside a glass wine bottle. The first question is: How does the pear find itself inside the bottle? The glass bottles are placed on the branches of pear trees while the pears are small buds. The pear unknowingly grows up trapped inside a bottle. Analogously, having grown up inside the technological society and the web of techniques that have us as their objects, we have all become cogs and like the pear find ourselves trapped in a transparent bottle that we cannot see. My suggestion for a possible way out lies, disappointingly, in our ability to identify and discuss the bottle now containing Western consciousness --

The New Leviathan. Before the glass bottle can be broken (if it can be broken), it must first be seen with the mind. Once seen, then details in the glass bottle might be recognized like cracks. In other words, we can experience a form of freedom by identifying the transparent bottle and a crack. The crack in the bottle is our knowledge that we are pears (or cogs) trapped inside.

Works Cited

Brickhouse, Thomas and Smith, Nicolas. The Philosophy of Socrates. Westview, 2000.

Ellul, Jacques. The Technological Society. Vintage Books. New York, 1964



How do you respond to the thought that you are a cog in the New Leviathan or a pear in a bottle? Questions, criticisms, thoughts? Contact:

B.J. Edenfield, Editor of this *Stone*
re0867@students.armstrong.edu

Faculty Advisors
Dr. Erik Nordenhaug
Erik.Nordenhaug@armstrong.edu

Dr. Jack Simmons
Jack.Simmons@armstrong.edu

For a look at past *Stones*, visit:
www.thales1.armstrong.edu/pdg/oldstones/